**Alternative Religiosities in the Soviet Union and the Communist East-Central Europe: Formations, Resistances and Manifestations**

Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović*

# Alternative Religiosity in Communist Yugoslavia: Migration as a Survival Strategy of the Nazarene Community

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0035
Received July 13, 2017; accepted August 23, 2017

**Abstract:** The Nazarenes were founded by a former Reformed minister Samuel Fröhlich about 1830 in Switzerland, but they soon expanded to Central and Eastern Europe. Because of their pacifist beliefs and refusal to swear and to take an oath a large number of the Nazarenes were condemned to severe prison sentences. This religious community was persecuted primarily during the communist era in Southeastern European countries (Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia) since they were considered disloyal citizens and a threat to the government. From 1945 until 1960 the Nazarene illegal border crossing from Yugoslavia to Italy or Austria was highly present. Rejecting one of the essential components of Yugoslav communism, so-called "nationwide defence and social self-protection", the Nazarenes were perceived as anti-communists and their existence was seen as illegitimate. The repression of this religious minority in communist Yugoslavia is the subject of this paper. The material collected for the purposes of this paper came to be the result of empirical research, conducted in Serbia (2009–2013) and the United States (2015), on the Nazarene community and their emigration to North America. Based on qualitative interviews and archival research, this paper aims to analyse community members' narratives of their lives during communism and emigration of this religious minority across the Atlantic.

**Keywords:** migration, marginalization, communism, Nazarenes, Yugoslavia, North America

## 1 Introduction

The migration of religious minorities to the New World is scarcely a new phenomenon. Even before the existence of modern nation states, religious groups emigrated across the Atlantic from Europe. There are several examples of the transatlantic migration of Protestant groups in the early modern period that indicate how persecuted religious minorities from Europe settled and integrated into their new homeland across the Atlantic, such as the Huguenots, Quakers, Amish, or Mennonites.[1] The number of religious minorities prone to migration to the English-speaking world increased considerably during the nineteenth and twentieth century. In the late 19th century one of the Eastern European religious minorities who emigrated to North America in massive numbers were Doukhobors. Religious intolerance and persecution were the main motivating factors for emigration. As with many other pacifist groups, Doukhobors had been exiled or sent to prison because they refused to fight for the Czar. Because of strong persecution they emigrated to Canada

1 Lachenicht, *Religious Refugees*; Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World*.

***Corresponding author: Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović,** Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Serbia; E-mail: saskadjuric@yahoo.com

in the late 19th century and during the first years of 20th century.[2] Alongside the examples of Doukhobors, Amish or Mennonites, in the following decades, another Radical Reformation group developed in Switzerland and spread in Southeastern Europe – Neutäufer or Nazarenes.[3]

The existence of various religious minority groups in the area of Southeastern Europe came into the focus of anthropological and historical research recently.[4] Church-State relations have been analysed by Western scholars[5] however, the lack of interest or in-depth analysis of archival or ethnographic sources is especially noticeable when it comes to research into religious minorities'. Most of existing scholarship does not cover minority religious communities, often multi-ethnic in their composition and not aligned with any particular national group. Thus, the focus of paper is on the Nazarene religious community and their emigration as a "survival strategy" during the communist era in Yugoslavia. The materials collected for this paper were the result of empirical research conducted in Serbia (2009–13) and the United States (2015).[6] Most members of the Nazarene community emigrated to Cleveland, Akron, and Mansfield (Ohio, U.S.) from Yugoslavia. In North America, they came to be known as the Apostolic Christians (Nazarenes).[7] My research was primarily ethnographic, involving semi-structured qualitative interviews with church leaders and members and a review of archival documents. The archival documents on the Apostolic Christian Church in the United States are preserved in the collections of the Virginia Historical Society (VHS) and cover 1946-92. Most of my subjects came to the United States during the communist period in Yugoslavia, especially between 1950 and 1975; however, several families came earlier, so some of my data represents second or third generations of immigrant families. My interviewees were members of six Nazarene-Apostolic Christian churches in Ohio: Brunswick Hills, Cleveland Romanian, West Akron, Mansfield, Norton, and Ontario. Serbian, Romanian, and English were used in the interviews. Among the group, were community members who had prison experiences or were caught in their attempt to leave the country illegally. Their life stories represent a unique historical record of otherwise undocumented events. The Nazarenes had only two choices when it came to avoiding persecution or imprisonment: emigration or accepting conscription into the army.

The aim of this paper is to twofold: to analyze the question of the Nazarene migration after the Second World War and to address the position of alternative religious movements during communist Yugoslavia. This paper also provides insight into several important features of overseas migration from Southeastern Europe which have not been explored, such as the role of religious minorities in migration history from this region.

The diversity of migration from Southeastern Europe to North America was especially prominent before 1921 and after the Second World War. However, the biggest wave of migration in the case of the Nazarenes occurred between 1950 and 1975. The case study of the Nazarene migration was a specific one because of their marginalised status as a religious minority and their doctrine of pacifism, which was the cause of severe persecution.[8] While escaping religious oppression was of the principal reasons for migration, non-violence, pacifism, and refusal to take oaths were the most significant markers of Nazarene identity.[9]

**2** Rak, *Negotiated Memory. Doukhobor Autobiographic Discourse*.

**3** Djurić Milovanović, "On the Road to Religious Freedom", 5.

**4** Bjelajac, "The Persecution of the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia 1918–1941"; Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National*; Todorović, *Evangelization, conversion and proselytism*; Vlase, "Viaţa şi practica religioasă".

**5** See for example: Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*; Ramet, *Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*; Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*.

**6** The field research in the United States was supported by the Apostolic Christian Church Foundation (Legacy Bible Institute and Wooster Church) grant for the research project "The Nazarene Emigration from Southeastern Europe to the United States: Historical and Contemporary Perspective" (March-June, 2015).

**7** Until 1917 the name of the community was Evangelical Baptists or sometimes New Amish, afterwards they were officially named the Apostolic Christian Church.

**8** Bjelajac, "The Persecution of the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia 1918–1941", 79–91.

**9** The paper results from the project of the Institute for Balkan Studies SASA "The Danube and the Balkans: Historical and Cultural Heritage" (no. 177006) funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

## 2 Who were the Nazarenes?

The Nazarenes, known as Evangelical Baptists or *Neutäufer*, were founded by the former Calvinist minister Samuel Heinrich Fröhlich in 1832 in Leutwil, Canton Argau, Switzerland. Fröhlich was strongly influenced by Anabaptism and German Pietism: he opposed the Calvinist theology of infant baptism, insisting instead on inner conversion.[10] Reviving some old Mennonite principles, this emerging religious community emphasised pacifism, the rejection of oaths and child baptism, and the need to separate themselves from the world. The Nazarene pacifism is inherited from the Anabaptist pacifist tradition, based on the New Testament Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew* 5). Christian Pacifist groups – whose pacifism is often referred as non-resistance – included several Radical reformation groups such are Anabaptists, Mennonites, Quakers, Plymouth Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists and Nazarenes.[11]

Nazarene communities practised strict discipline, which included prohibitions against drinking alcohol and coffee, smoking, cursing, going to public festivities, and attending religious ceremonies in other churches. Icons and representations of the cross on which Jesus was crucified were strictly forbidden. In spreading Nazarene teachings and other missionary activities, the vernaculars of several languages had an important role in religious services and hymn-singing. Each congregation consisted of members baptised as adults (in a believer's baptism) , thereafter called Brothers and Sisters, and non-baptised friends of the community.

From the very beginning, Fröhlich and his followers were subjected to grave persecution. In this period, preaching in houses was forbidden, the baptism of new-borns was obligatory, and marriage was recognised only for Lutherans, Catholics, and Jews. Fröhlich preached during different missionary journeys in Switzerland (Canton Aargau, Canton Bern, Emmental, Zurich, and Eastern Switzerland), during which he gained new followers and baptised people. After 1850, the Nazarenes spread east towards Central and Eastern Europe and west towards North America. Froehlich's followers started crossing across the Atlantic in 1847. They were mostly ethnic Germans who settled in the American Midwest. Until 1917, the name of their community was Evangelical Baptists or, sometimes, the New Amish; later, they were officially called the Apostolic Christian Church.[12]

The first Nazarene converts from Austria-Hungary were the Hungarian locksmiths János Denkel and János Kropacsek. They travelled to Switzerland, where they were inspired by Fröhlich's preaching. After returning to Budapest in 1839, they presented their new religious experience to a young Catholic apprentice Lajos Hencsey. Inspired by the testimony of Denkel and Kropacsek, Hencsey founded the first Nazarene congregation in Hungary.[13] The first converts were mostly journeymen from different areas of Hungary, and came from both Catholic and Lutheran backgrounds.[14] In multi-ethnic and multidenominational Habsburg Empire and later on Austria-Hungary, the Nazarenes had an extremely mixed ethnic character, which enabled their rapid spread among different settlements. One of the strengths of this religious community was its ability to attract new members from all the nationalities that inhabited the ethnically mixed area of Northern Yugoslavia (Austria-Hungary, 1867–1918). In the beginning, the Nazarenes had more members among the Protestant population (mostly Germans and Hungarians), but, over time, some Orthodox Serbs and Romanians were joining the Nazarene community.[15] The first Protestant Serbs thus began appearing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[16] Having believers from different ethnic backgrounds and holding religious services in many languages, number of the Nazarenes was growing.

**10** Ruegger, *Apostolic Christian Church History*.
**11** See: Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*.
**12** Sutter, *The Anabaptist Apostolic Christian Church of America*, 28.
**13** Eotvos, *The Nazarenes*.
**14** Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National*, 51.
**15** Djurić Milovanović, "Conservative neo-Protestants", 36.
**16** Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National*, 11.

## 3 The Nazarenes in Yugoslavia: disloyal citizens or pacifist Christians?

After World War I, the spread of the Nazarenes in the newly-formed Yugoslav state occupied much political as well as the attention of the Orthodox priests. The Nazarenes were monitored by state officials, and many reports reveal their growth or decline and the locations of their churches (which were usually in private homes). Since the Nazarenes strongly criticised the prevailing political order and the Orthodox Church, they came into conflict not only with the state but also with Orthodox priests, who published many anti-Nazarene articles, books, and pamphlets.[17] These texts represent the only written source on the community from this period, since the Nazarenes themselves did not leave any written history.

Beside strong morality and work ethic, the Nazarene communities were based on communitarian principles with high solidarity of their members, which was very important in rural and peasant areas of south Hungary and later in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.[18] Communitarian principles, pacifism and anti-clericalism characterized the Nazarene community, along with disinterest in politics, distinguished this minority group from the rest of the society.

In this turbulent period post-First World War Yugoslavia, marked with the rise of nationalism and creation of the new nation-states, the Nazarenes were exposed to many challenges. After the end of the First World War and the dissolution of the Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (from 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was formed in 1918 and it existed until 1941. Change of the state borders, politics and religious landscape was significant when it comes to minorities issues. State policy towards religious communities was inevitably linked to the national question. In the period of Yugoslavian nation building between the two world wars, this multiethnic religious community was not recognized by the law; therefore all gatherings were prohibited and faced sanctions.[19] But members of this community still gathered secretly and quickly spread in both rural and urban areas. The Ministry of Religion ordered obligatory military service and did not have an option for the Nazarenes to serve in non-combatant roles in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In the article "The Battle over New-Believers" published in Serbian daily newspaper *Politika* [Politics], the Nazarenes were described as a rapidly growing religious sect whose activities were prohibited by the state. In 1924 the Ministry of Religious Affairs sent orders to all police officials in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to prohibit all further activity of the societies of the Nazarenes and of the Adventists, to close all their prayer houses, and to arrest their agitators and their preachers and to deliver them to the courts.[20] The New Constitution of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1931 proclaimed that: "Civil and political liberties are independent of a confession of faith. No one, by virtue of one's faith, can be released from citizens' legal duties and military responsibilities".[21] Other religious minorities were also persecuted by the state (Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses). However, the only religious community that did not obey the laws of the country regarding military service were the Nazarenes and some small number of Seventh Day Adventists. Despite imprisonment, the Nazarene attitude towards persecution and penalties in their discourse was almost always Biblically explained. During several years of ethnographic field research of the Nazarene community in Serbia and later in the United States, their testimonies on persecution were explained by way of the truthfulness of their theology. Among the interviewees were also those who personally experienced imprisonment and almost all of them argued that they would do the same thing again if needed, and they would not abandon their faith.

In order to understand the complex situation for the Nazarenes in post-WWII Yugoslavia, it is necessary to have a broader picture of the relationship of the communist state with religious communities. The historical, cultural and political experience of Yugoslav state produced particular attitudes towards atheism and religion. According to Aleksov, 'throughout most of World War II, in order to prevent the

**17** Slijepčević, *Nazareni u Srbiji do 1914*.
**18** Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National*.
**19** Bjelajac, "The Persecution of the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia 1918–1941", 80.
**20** *Politika*, February 18, 1925, no. 6042, 5.
**21** Bjelajac, "The Persecution of the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia 1918–1941", 88.

alienation of a large, mostly-peasant following, the communist leadership of the Yugoslav resistance movement was tolerant towards the Church and allowed priests to celebrate Mass with the troops. Even non-combatant service in partisan units was permitted for members of religious groups whose conscience did not allow the carrying of weapons'.[22] However, from 1945, the situation changed dramatically in terms of the relationship between state and church. Studies on this issue focused primarily on three major confessions: the Orthodox Church, which comprised 48%; Roman Catholics - 36%; and Moslems, 14% out of the total number of respondents who declared themselves to belong to a religious community according to the population census of 1953 (the last census which included religious affiliation). Being less numerous (1% in 1953), Protestants are usually omitted from historical research and analysis.[23] In available Yugoslav historiography, two phases in the Yugoslav state policy towards religious communities have been identified. [24] The first phase started after WWII and lasted until 1948, with much similarity between Yugoslavia and other East European countries in the policy toward religious communities. The second was initiated with the conflict with Cominform[25] and the emergence of the new state policy. These differences in the state policy affected all religious communities and had an impact on the state control over religious institutions. Religious instruction was removed from schools in Yugoslavia as early as 1945, and religious publications were practically banned through the confiscation of church presses.[26] The 1946 Yugoslav Constitution proclaimed two main principles: freedom of conscience and religion, and the separation of church and state. Both the Constitution and the Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities (1953, 1978) were more liberal than in other communist countries such as Romania or Russia. However, practice differed from these principles: while religious communities appeared to be tolerated, religion in the public sphere was forbidden. Church-state relations after the Second World War were complex and mostly focused on the relationship with the so-called traditional churches: the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.[27] Small neo-Protestant religious groups were not the main source of tension between religious and communist ideologies. Nevertheless, religious minorities in Yugoslavia were controlled by the state, especially because of their international and transnational networks as well as their missionary work. Some of them were persecuted because of their pacifism (Nazarenes, Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists) and members were condemned to long and repeated prison sentences. On the other hand, the Nazarenes came to the attention of state authorities because of certain doctrinal and communal principles, such as their refusal to vote and carry arms, resistance to collectivisation and the distribution of land previously owned by Germans, rejection of newly-formed mass political organisations, and disinclination to hand over alleged agricultural surpluses.[28] The Law on Land Reform and Settlement (1945) and subsequently with The Law on Nationalization of Rent-Houses and Buildings (1958) had significant impact on the Nazarene community members who were mostly peasants. As Aleksov stresses "The collectivization and requisition of agricultural surplus seriously affected many in post war years, but applied to the Nazarenes, who were almost exclusively peasant, these measures affected the whole community".[29] Consequently, the socio-historical context of the Nazarenes' pre-emigration experience was marked by a hard life and marginalised position. Remaining without their land, with men who spent years in prison and women who took care of children in their numerous families, many Nazarenes were choosing emigration as the only way to survive. After years of imprisonment, the men decided to find a way to escape and join their fellow believers abroad, where they could live in their faith freely with their families.

**22** Aleksov, *The Dynamics of Extinction*, 8.
**23** Ibid.
**24** Radić, *Država i verske zajednice*, 652.
**25** Cominform is an abbreviation for the Communist Information Bureau. Here, the term refers to the Cominform Resolution of June 28, 1948 resulting from the Tito–Stalin Split that accused the Communist Party of Yugoslavia for anti-Soviet attitude.
**26** Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*.
**27** Radić, *Država i verske zajednice*.
**28** Aleksov, *The Dynamics of Extinction*, 26.
**29** Ibid., 15.

According to the 1953 census, there were 15,650 Nazarenes in Yugoslavia.[30] "After Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, the country was in a permanent state of 'total defence'. The ruthless treatment of predominantly Nazarene conscientious objectors can be explained in terms of the general sense of military insecurity".[31] The Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities stresses that "The belonging to a religious community, or the profession of a religion, does not exempt anyone from the general civil, military or other obligations which the citizens must perform according to the law".[32]

From 1949, the Nazarenes were condemned to harsh prison sentences in the worst communist prisons such as *Goli otok* or Barren Island, along with political prisoners like Cominformists, 'communists who had sided with the Resolution of Stalin's Communist Information Bureau in the conflict with Tito'.[33] *Goli otok* was a prison (1949-89) in the Adriatic for political prisoners and other 'anti-communists' such as the Nazarenes. The Nazarenes were perceived as disloyal citizens who were unwilling to take oaths of allegiance or defend their country by joining the army. The Nazarenes were perceived as unpatriotic and anti-communist and, therefore, a direct threat to the system: they questioned the militarisation of the Yugoslav citizenry through compulsory military service. Aleksov argues that an essential component of Yugoslav communism was so-called '*nationwide and social self-protection*': 'according to this doctrine, all citizens were regarded as soldiers or parts of defence while the Yugoslav army was held as a guardian of the Yugoslav communist system. The doctrine of brotherhood in unity held that it was the duty of citizens to defend their country, if need be, by taking up arms'.[34] Military duty was one of the most important elements in developing patriotism, and any attempt to excuse oneself from such was severely sanctioned. The Nazarenes were seen as a rapidly growing 'harmful sect', whose members persisted in their pacifist attitudes despite strict penalties. The Nazarenes reacted to the pressure to serve in the army and the prohibition on their religious activities by strengthening their narrative of suffering and persecution, which heightened their sense of superiority as a chosen group. However, this also represented a challenge for the community, since it affected internal cohesion. At this time, a split among the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia emerged. One group of the Nazarenes (the new Nazarenes) agreed to take oaths, while the others continued to reject them. The state encouraged the new Nazarene group to convince their former fellows, the old Nazarenes, to accept military service.[35] It is hard to estimate the number of those imprisoned for conscientious objection, but, according to Nazarene testimonies there were usually between 20 to 40 prisoners at any one time:

> [1] I was in Goli otok prison from 1957 to 1961. There were all kinds of criminals. Once some prisoner asked me: 'Who did you kill?', and I said 'I didn't kill anyone!'. They could not understand why we were sentenced. *Were there many Nazarenes at Goli otok prison*? Yes, over 2,000 people in ten buildings divided by [the sort of] crime. *And the Nazarenes?* There were 40 of us. We could not work on Sundays, so we were punished for three months with no visits, no mail, nothing. (SK, male, born 1932 in Vajska, emigrated in 1968 to Akron)

Among my interviewees, many had been in *Goli otok* prison before escaping from the country. Some were sentenced several times to terms of five to ten years for refusing to bear arms. Repeated sentencing was very common for the Nazarenes who would reject bearing arms in the army after receiving a new call. While waiting in prison for sentencing, they would be called to the military court, where judges would try to convince them to renounce their decisions and thereby avoid long prison sentences.

> [2] In the autumn of 1955, I was invited to join the army in Prilep in Macedonia. I was lodged in the barracks. And when I was supposed to receive the gun, I refused it. Thus, I violated their law. They were trying to convince me to take the gun and serve in the army first: afterwards I could believe in anything I wanted. But I wanted to act in accordance with my Nazarene faith. Then I was transferred to the remand prison in Skopje. I was sentenced to 3.5 years in prison and transferred to Idrizovo, there is a jail there. I worked as a craftsman, so I cannot say it was so bad. The food was not bad; it was only cold in the winter. There were about 100 prisoners in the room, all kinds of criminals; many of them were Macedonians and

**30** Radić, *Država i verske zajednice*, 122.
**31** Aleksov, *The Dynamics of Extinction*, 18–19.
**32** *The Official Gazette of the F.P. R. of Yugoslavia* (No 22 of May 27, 1953).
**33** Ibid, 18.
**34** Aleksov, *The Dynamics of Extinction*, 13; Johnson, *The Role of the Military in Communist Yugoslavia*.
**35** Archive of Yugoslavia, inv.no. 69-64-103

> Muslims who killed someone in vendettas. *Were there many Nazarenes?* There were, we were able to talk in the room but no religious services or Bibles were allowed. "I went out from the prison in 1959 and started working in Belgrade. But I knew I will get a call for military again. There were many Nazarenes in Idrizovo prison that served sentence twice or three times. I decided to run away alone. I went to Rijeka by train and from Rijeka to Kopar. Then I started to walk 10-15 km to cross the border to Italy. *No passport?* No, it was illegal. A lot of people run illegally. I have walked for two days through vineyards, woods, hills. I didn't know where I was… When I heard dogs barking, I knew the border is close. I was lucky and crossed the river and arrived to Trieste" (ĐB, male, born 1936 in Gospođinci, emigrated in 1961 to Akron)

The Nazarenes generally obeyed the Bible verse "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1), but they could not accept compulsory military service, take oaths, participate in the collectivisation of land and agricultural reforms, or vote in elections. Thus, the Nazarene internal notion that they were not 'against the government' was perceived completely differently by external society and the communist system, whose most important sources for developing patriotism and political support were military service and mass political organisations. However, contact between the Nazarenes and the communists existed in interwar Yugoslavia [3]. There was a sizable underground communist movement whose members were imprisoned if they were caught. The Nazarenes could be imprisoned along with communists, sometimes in the same jail cells.[36]

> [3] If our government had allowed us to serve in the army without guns, we would not have escaped [Yugoslavia]. We even had nothing against the government. The Bible says: 'Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities'. We left because of the government. Some of the Nazarenes were even with Tito and Rankovic in prison. And they said that when they came to power, the Nazarenes would not be in prisons. But after the communists came, the Nazarenes did not want to vote for the government, because they did not believe in God. And then we were back in prison. (ĐB, male, born 1936 in Gospođinci, emigrated in 1961 to Akron)

The available sources indicate that the main reasons for Nazarene emigration were persecution, imprisonment because of their pacifist stance, and a lack of religious freedom. Unwilling to abjure key elements of their doctrine, hundreds of Nazarenes escaped to North America in several waves, which mainly occurred a few years before the First World War and in the interwar period and after the Second World War.[37] From 1950 to 1965, illegal border crossings from Yugoslavia into Italy or Austria by the Nazarenes were numerous. Thus, during the Cold War, the Nazarenes were seen as Christian refugees seeking a country with religious freedom.

## 4 (In)visible migrants: Nazarene illegal emigration

Nazarene emigration after the Second World War was mostly illegal. Although the emigration policy in Yugoslavia changed after 1965, passport could be obtained only if a person served the obligatory military service.[38] Soon after in 1967 this policy was changed and all Yugoslav citizens could travel abroad and obtain passports.[39] Nevertheless, many Nazarenes escaped before this date. In the interviews I collected, my subjects mentioned illegal border crossings into Italy or Austria very often: usually, these people did not have passports since they had not fulfilled a term of obligatory military service [4], [6]. These illegal border crossings were well-planned, but many Nazarenes were nonetheless caught trying to escape from communist Yugoslavia. Some of them succeeded after several attempts.

> [4] I was thinking that if I have children, they will go through this again. So I decided to leave. *You knew that many Nazarenes had already left?* I knew all of that. My father had ten siblings and all were Nazarenes. Then five of them were in prison. I knew all that and I decided to leave, but I could not leave normally, I had to flee. They would not certify my passport. *How*

**36** Ehnle and Ehnle, "Stories of Faith and Courage", 15–16.

**37** The Nazarene emigration started in the first years of the 20th century, but it was less numerous than the waves after the Second World War. See: Djurić Milovanović "On the Road to Religious Freedom": a Study of the Nazarene Emigration from Southeastern Europe to North America.

**38** Ivanović, *Geburtstag pišeš normalno*, 65.

**39** Zakon o putnim ispravama jugoslovenskih državljana, 1967 (Službeni list SFRJ 15/67).

*did you do it?* Alone. My cousin lived in Germany, I asked him to bring me close to the border and then I would leave on my own. And so it was I went to Maribor, Sentinel. *To Austria?* Yes, to Austria. He let me out of the car and I ran. I was lost for three days in the woods before I reached Austria. (BŽ, Akron, male, born in 1954 in Sombor, emigrated in 1975 to Akron)

In their narratives on migration, the Nazarenes would first mention their reasons for emigration, which were mostly illegal before 1965. By condemning them to serve their sentences in the worst prisons, the communist government was trying to influence the other Nazarene members to accept military service and the obligation to vote: it wanted to frighten them with severe and repeated sentencing for their conscientious objection.[40]

[5] I was in prison from 1954 to 1957. I was convicted in Niš and served in Kruševac and Belgrade. We were building a police station near the Danube train station. *You refused to carry arms?* Yes, arms and oaths. I was with one German brother. *Did they try to convince you to accept arms in court?* Yes, they said take the gun and you go home immediately. But Nazarenes rarely changed their mind. *How were the conditions in the prison?* In Niš it was good, in Kruševac we worked on the construction site so it was better. One of my bothers was sentenced to two five-year sentences and the other even three times. They were both in Goli otok prison. Once again I got the call [to join the army]: I did not want to go and we were looking for someone who could help us to leave. I was fooled, together with 16 other Nazarenes. We paid this guide and he betrayed us. He worked for UDBA, we didn't know that. When we arrived, the police were waiting for us at the train station. I was in prison again for four months" (MV, Mansfield, male, born in 1933 in Adaševci, emigrated in 1964 to Mansfield)

After being released from prison, Nazarene men usually made plans to flee the country, since they knew they would be called to serve in the army again. According to their personal testimonies, many Nazarenes organised border crossings in groups, sometimes with non-Nazarene guides as assistants. There were cases where guides reported escape plans to the local authorities.

Pressures from the outside, more precisely from the state authorities, created an identity of a closed religious minority group among the Nazarenes. Furthermore, the Nazarenes became (in)visible migrants. Since there are almost no available records on Nazarene illegal emigration, it is still an open question as to whether the communist government let the Nazarenes flee or whether they were successful in escaping without being caught.

After crossing the border into Italy or Austria, the Nazarenes sought refugee camps organised especially for those applying for further immigration to the United States, Canada, or Australia. The Swiss Nazarene organisation *Hilfe* helped to resettle many Nazarene refugees in Austria immediately after World War II.[41] Most of my subjects had been were settled in refugee camps in Italy (Risiera di Sam Sabba, Cime Centre Latina and Capua Casserta) or Austria (Traiskirhen and Asten). Providing documents that proved they had been imprisoned in Yugoslavia, they would be placed on a waiting list. Some waited for several months before their application for entry into the desired country was approved. In these camps, the Nazarenes organised Sunday services and gathered to sing hymns.

However, the most significant organisation for Nazarene migrants was the Church World Service (CWS), a body founded in 1946 in the United States. This was a cooperative ministry between 37 Christian denominations that also provided assistance to refugees and asylum seekers around the world. The Apostolic Christian Church of the Nazarenes was a member of the CWS; all of the interviewees who left Yugoslavia after WWII were assisted by it. Archival sources indicate that Nazarenes from Yugoslavia utilised CWS assistance from 1959 for their immigration to North America. The application forms in the VHS archive contain valuable information on Nazarene emigrants: personal data, pictures, short biographies, information on imprisonment, and the reasons for emigration. The Nazarenes were looking for a country that permitted religious freedom, where the right to conscientious objection was recognized, and where they could serve in the army as non-combatants. The CWS forms contain narrative descriptions of each emigrant:

**40** Radić, *Država i verske zajednice*, 429.

**41** Pfeiffer, *Between Remnant and Renewal*, 159.

'The applicant appears to be nice and honest. Owing to his religion, he has been imprisoned in a communist prison for many years. He is very anxious to resettle in the United States and he is prepared to work hard and on any job – of course he would rather work as a tailor, having good experience in that trade. He hopes to be able to build a decent life and future' (Necakov Stevan, Čenta, year of application: 1962).

The CWS played a major role in Nazarene emigration by providing loans for travel, invitation letters, medical care, etc. The Nazarenes in the United States were regularly informed about the need to provide sponsorships for their co-religionists waiting in the camps. The Nazarenes received help from churches or from family members with whom they had kept in contact through letters. Letters and packages served not only an important personal support role for poor Nazarene families waiting for their man to come out from prison, but also, to keep communities informed on possibilities of emigration, sponsors and financial support for the journey. After they received invitation letters from their sponsors, Nazarenes started their journey from Yugoslavia to Austria/Italy and reaching North America, mostly Ohio, California, and Ontario (Canada). Developing industry attracted the immigrants to urban areas such as Cleveland, Mansfield, and Akron. Local church historian Evelyn Betz notes how 'many of these immigrants had learned a trade in Europe and came skilled as a cabinet maker, upholsterer, tailor, baker, butcher or tool maker. Their skills were welcomed and profitable in the agricultural area of Mansfield'.[42]

In North America, the Nazarenes joined established immigrant communities and started a new congregational life. Their first impressions of the new churches and communities were generally positive [7], [8], since they were joining institutions similar to those they left behind in Yugoslavia:

[6] *When you came to Akron, was it similar to your church in Yugoslavia?* The preaching was the same, but some customs weren't, they would dress differently, that's all. There were a lot of people, 115 of them in a weekly children's choir. I have 12 kids and we loved it right away. (BŽ, Akron, male, born in 1954 in Sombor, emigrated in 1975 to Akron).

[7] A group of people welcomed us, all from the church. They all flew from Yugoslavia before we did. They were our people. I felt sorry I abandoned my country, but there was such crises that we could not live there any more. (KK, female, born in 1936 in Sombor, emigrated in 1968 to Akron).

[8] We have found a better setting here than that which we left behind. From the first day when we were welcomed and [I saw that] it was my people, I had a nice time here. In the church it was the same. You see, when we were there, no-one was looking at nationality. There were Serbs, Croats, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, seven nations, we all sang in one voice during the service on Sunday (SK, male, born 1932 in Vajska; emigrated 1968 in Akron).

Going abroad, the Nazarenes remained committed to the religious communities to which they belonged in their homelands. This was an important basis for better integration into the new society (finding jobs, housing, etc.), but it was also an expression of unity among the members. Nevertheless, the displacement of the Nazarenes from Yugoslavia to North America had a significant effect on the development of the American Nazarene churches and their old/new religious practices. Bringing old traditions and customs from their homelands, the Nazarenes were confronted with many challenges in the new communities they joined, such as some rituals and dress codes; for instance, in America many grew moustaches, which had traditionally been rejected by the Apostolic Christian Church as a symbol of pride and militarism [9]. The influence of Eastern European customs persisted for many years. Closed weddings or baptisms (i.e. not open to non-members) represented an old legacy from the persecution of the Nazarenes in Yugoslavia, when religious rituals were held in secret. This practice changed over the years.

[9] A lot of people who were born here, like myself, sometimes would be in conflict. The people from Europe would come and insert their customs into the church. *Did they have more conservative customs?* Yes, very conservative. They didn't believe in wearing neckties. And only a white shirt, no coloured shirts. In the '50s, when I was young, they didn't have TV. No dancing, no smoking, no drinking, no wedding rings, women were not allowed to cut their hair [and had to wear] head coverings. Older women wore a 'pundja' on their heads. Men and women sat separately in the church. Divorce was almost unheard of in the church. (DT, male, born 1938 in Norman)

**42** Sheetz and Betz, "Winds of Change: 1945–1949", 1.

The constant influx of new members from Eastern Europe brought to the fore inner differences between the first Nazarene immigrants and new ones coming from communist Yugoslavia. One of the main characteristics of Nazarene services was the use of various languages. Until the 1920s, various Apostolic Christian Church congregations used German. This was the legacy of the first immigrants from Switzerland and Germany at the beginning of the century. Extensive social pressure was put on German-speaking communities and churches to adopt the English language and American socio-cultural norms. After 1932, only a small number of German-speaking Apostolic Christian churches existed. However, the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe had a significant impact on the languages used, since everyone wanted to hear preaching in their mother tongues (having no knowledge of English or German). This led to the establishment of ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse religious communities during the high point of immigration from Eastern Europe after the Second World War. This example indicates that many immigrants attend religious institutions that were multiethnic.[43] Alongside multiethnicity that characterised the Nazarenes in U.S., the new generations had influence on the church development in terms of modernization, English language, missiology and welfare. Most of the second-generation of the Nazarene immigrants from Yugoslavia remained within the same community or so-called sister church – the Apostolic Christian Church of America. However, some studies show that the second-generation immigrants are less religious and that their religious identity is more symbolical than real.[44] The experiences of their parents and grandparents during communist time differ from their own. Thus, younger members born in U.S. share their family members life stories narratives on persecution, alongside of their own religious experiences such as conversion or youth activities within the church.

## 5 Concluding remarks

It could be said that the history of Nazarene migration is also the history of the disappearance of this community from Yugoslavia. Aleksov stresses that 'by the time the Yugoslav state established non-combatant services there were almost no Nazarenes to apply for them'.[45] Seeking a 'free society' in order to escape religious and political oppression, the Nazarenes started to emigrate even in the first years of the 20th century. However, after the Second World War, emigration increased since their position deteriorated. On the other hand, stronger support was developed with communities across the Atlantic as well as with organizations such as Church World Service and World Council of Churches, which supported emigration from communist lands. Transnational ties encouraged and supported the Nazarene migration and in the years following the emergence of communist rule tried to influence the Yugoslav government to liberate imprisoned Nazarene members.

The Nazarene emigration from Southeastern Europe lasted throughout the 20th century, with the highest number of emigrants leaving between 1950 and 1975. In this paper I have drawn on the migration of this transnational religious community in order to highlight the important role that religious beliefs and practices play in the process of "invisible migration". Emigration of the Nazarenes could be seen as a survival strategy of one alternative religious movement in the years of communist rule in Yugoslavia. The research presented in this paper indicates how communist religious policy affected conscientious objectors and confessional minorities in general. Equally, it shows how alternative religious traditions could become both the main source of tension with the state, as well as the 'channel for migration'. The example of the Nazarene migration from Yugoslavia during the communist era represents an interesting case in the modern history of immigration to the United States.

**43** Stepick, "God is Apparently not Dead. The Obvious, the Emergent and the still unknown in Immigration and Religion", 17.
**44** Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity: Towards a Comparison of Ethnic and Religious Acculturation", 577–592.
**45** Aleksov, *The Dynamics of Extinction*, 28.

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